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THE YAHOO, THE YOWIE, AND REPORTS OF AUSTRALIAN HAIRY BIPEDS

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ABSTRACT: Questions surrounding the supposed Yahoo, Yowie, or supposed wild man of south-eastern Australia are examined in light of what is known of the Australian mammal fauna, the nomenclature of the wild man, the role of the wild man in both Aboriginal and Anglo cosmologies, and the claimed existence of the wild man himself. A giant marsupial, such as a wombat, may have survived the megafaunal extinctions, giving rise to the wild man reports.

INTRODUCTION

The paper by Joyner (1984) on the Australian "wild man," and one of its names, Yahoo, has given rise to several responses (Raynal 1985, Bayanov 1985, Becker 1985). It is clear from these responses that several different issues have become mixed-up, and ought to be disentangled if we are to make any headway in this area of Australian cryptozoology. These issues include: (1) the nature of the Australian mammal fauna, present and past; (2) the nomenclature of the wild man; (3) the part played by near-human beings in the cosmology of (a) Aboriginal and (b) pioneer Anglo-European societies; and (4) the question of the existence of an unknown species itself. I would like to comment on these four issues in turn.

THE AUSTRALIAN MAMMAL FAUNA

Bayanov (1985: 109) states that Australia "is known to have originally been populated by only two species of major placental mammals, *Homo sapiens* and his dingo dog." Perhaps the meaning of "major" is in question here. According to the most recent compilation (Strahan 1983), plus a few subsequent additions known to me, the total number of extant or recently extinct indigenous mammal species in Australia is 258; of these, slightly over half (2 monotremes, 133 marsupials) are not placentals, the remainder being rodents (55 species, all endemic), bats (58 species, about half of them endemic), carnivores (9 species, one being endemic), the dugong, and sundry cetaceans. The existence of the endemic placental rodents, in particular, is unknown even to many Australians. If Bayanov, by "major" placentals, means species of large size, then one must draw attention to the presence of the marine carnivores (pinnipeds), all of rather large size; certainly, they originally arrived by swimming, but one of them, *Neophoca cinerea*, is found nowhere else. Bayanov, when he objects to Joyner's submission that any

unknown creature need not have been manlike, would therefore seem to have extra cards up his sleeve unknown even to himself!

What is true, however, is that combining large size with terrestrial habitat really would restrict the choice to marsupials. At the present time, the largest known terrestrial, indigenous mammal (after *Homo sapiens*) is the red kangaroo, *Macropus rufus*. In the not-too-distant past, however, far larger animals, the so-called Megafauna, were present: the rhino-sized *Diprotodon* and *Zygomaturus*, distantly related to wombats, the giant true wombat *Phascolonus* (mentioned by Joyner), large true kangaroos, and the gigantic short-faced kangaroos (Sthenurinae). Though generally thought to have become extinct at, or in some cases before, the end of the Pleistocene, some megafaunal species are now known to have persisted until 6,000 B.P. (Fethney, Horton, and Wright 1986).

It should also be mentioned that the former existence of two indigenous human "races" within Australia has been proposed, on fossil evidence (Thorne 1976): one archaic, with large teeth, and, especially, a flat receding forehead, and the other of modern type. More recently, Brown (1981) has shown that the main defining features of the "flatheads" are due to artificial cranial deformation, so that the two forms differ much less than was thought—if they were distinct at all.

The Nomenclature of Australian Wild Men

In an effort to determine whether anything could be added to Joyner's survey, I sought the assistance of the Australian National Dictionary Project. W. S. Ramson has very kindly allowed me to use the results of their researches to date. The earliest Australian record of the name *yahoo* so far dug up is from J. Holman's *Travels* (1835, 4: 480): "The natives are greatly terrified by the sight of a person in a mask calling him 'devil' or *Yah-hoo*, which signifies evil spirit." This predates by seven years the earliest record cited by Joyner (1977, 1980). A similar ritual or supernatural association to the Yahoo pervades all written reports up to 1871, when the first report of one being seen and identified as a Yahoo was made by a non-Aboriginal (Joyner 1977: 3–4).

Becker (1985: 107) recommends that "the aboriginal language should be examined more closely before it is discounted as the source of *yahoo*." There were, in fact, some 200 distinct Aboriginal languages spoken in Australia; while the languages of the Sydney, Snowy Mountains, and South Coast regions (the wild man's prime stamping-ground) are among the half or more that are now extinct, the name *yahoo* did indeed occur in one of them. Joyner (1977: 12) refers to a letter to a Queanbeyan newspaper in 1903 revealing that *yahoo* in one language (apparently from the Snowy Mountains region) meant the grey-crowned babbler (*Pomatostomus temporalis*). Also, the Australian National Dictionary refers to R. H. Croll in 1928 as awarding the name *yah-hoo* to a "catbird" in Victoria (but he probably likewise referred to a babbler, as catbirds do not, to my knowledge, occur as far south as Victoria).

So *yahoo* really did occur in an Aboriginal language. Does this make any difference? I would think not, especially as the Aboriginal people of the Snowies, who called the babbler *yahoo*, denied all knowledge of a wild man (Joyner 1977: 13). Joyner (1984) is quite right to refer to the likelihood of linguistic borrowings, to which all languages are liable. The line of argument promoted by him, and extended by Becker (1985), is that Swift's invention was first made flesh in the form of the orang-utan, and then transferred to an alien entity in Australia—and, indeed, in the Bahamas (Raynal 1985).

At present, the term *yahoo* seems to have lost its "hairy man" usage in Australia; it is commonly used to denote uncouth individuals, generally on motorcycles, whose chief activity is outraging the more docile citizenry (synonyms: *hoon, yobbo*). This is, of course, an exact return to Swift's usage. A better known name for the hairy wild man today is the Yowie. For this term, however, the Australian National Dictionary and Joyner (1977) fail to find any great antiquity; Joyner quotes the *Sun-Herald* for December, 1975, and the Australian National Dictionary *The Bulletin* for May of the same year. (This would be about the time that the city fathers of Queanbeyan offered an appreciable sum of money for the Yowie's apprehension—a sum which seems never to have been claimed.) The Australian National Dictionary does, however, draw attention to the following passage in Kevin Gilbert's *Living Black* (1977: 241): "We had the legendary bunyip, the giant water snake, the little people and the hairy youree—the huge shaggy man-like creature that the whites call 'yowie.'" If Gilbert (here referring to his own experience) is truly speaking of the myths of his own people, the Wiradjuri of southern New South Wales west of the ranges, rather than generalizing about Aboriginal mythology, then this would seem at the same time to suggest an origin for *yowie*, and to place the concept firmly within the mythological sphere, to which we should now turn.

Wild Men in Australian Cosmology

(a) Wild Men and the Aboriginal People

Where a wild man is described on the evidence of Aboriginal traditions (Joyner 1977), he is an unearthly humanoid monster, a "devil-devil" (pp. 4–6), "big pfeller devil" (p. 21), or a mythical bogeyman (pp. 22–26). Where specified, the locale of such beliefs is always the coastal region: the Hunter River, or the New South Wales south coast as far inland as Braidwood (Fig. 1). In one case (p. 25), the Ngarigo *dulugal* (almost the same word as used

in the coastal Dhurga, Dyirringan and Dharawal languages) is not especially supernatural, but a "wild blackfellow"; the Ngarigo language, as Joyner records, was spoken in the Delegate region, near Bombala (somewhat inland from the coast). Note that an Anglo resident of the Snowy Mountains region (Joyner 1977: 13) at the turn of the century stated that he had many times asked local Aborigines about the "hairy man," and they denied any knowledge of it.

This seems to localize Aboriginal wild man beliefs, and to identify them as mythological, like Gilbert's *youree* (above), and like the northeast Queensland *quinkan* mentioned by Joyner (1977: 22). Outside the New South Wales south and central coast region, if known at all, the word for wild man seems to have meant simply some kind of renegade. Aboriginal mythology, in surviving cultures at any rate, is not a history of once-and-for-all past events, but a living, ever-present reality (the Dreaming). In the main, early Anglo settlers had fixed ideas about Aboriginal people, and made little attempt to have these preconceptions challenged. It is very remarkable, on looking through Joyner's compilation, how few of the entries are based on Aboriginal reports, and those that are, are of a mythological nature, unappreciated by their Anglo recorders.

(b) Wild Men in Settler Folklore

One of the reports in Joyner's compilation (1977: 10–12) records the killing and post-mortem examination, in Braidwood, of what sounds like a very large wombat. (The common wombat, *Vombatus ursinus,* reaches a head-and-body length of 1,150 mm, i.e., some 45¼ inches; the Braidwood animal was "four feet long.") Another reference (pp. 14–17) seems to relate to a large kangaroo. As Bayanov (1985: 109) states, other reports certainly do not support the hypothesis that "the" wild man in Australia "is" a wombat, even the giant megafaunal *Phascolonus.* But the other reports from settlers and pioneers, although they are supposed to be eyewitness reports, are a hotchpotch of shooters' campfire tales, unidentifiable apparitions seen at dusk, and various hairy horrids that frightened the horses and demoralized the dogs. What can we make of them?

Anderson (1986) has recently provided a most striking analogue of these wild man reports in his analysis of supposed sightings of the extinct moa (a large, flightless bird) by early Anglo pioneers in New Zealand. As he notes, eighteenth century sailors were wont to see polar bears, gigantic kangaroos, and the like, but these sorts of sightings decline, and, after about 1840, the sightings of unknown beasts always concerned the native moas.

The following points emerge from Anderson's analysis: (1) moas were not reported until their subfossil bones became known; (2) they were reported as being very tall (up to twice as tall as we now know they were), and very

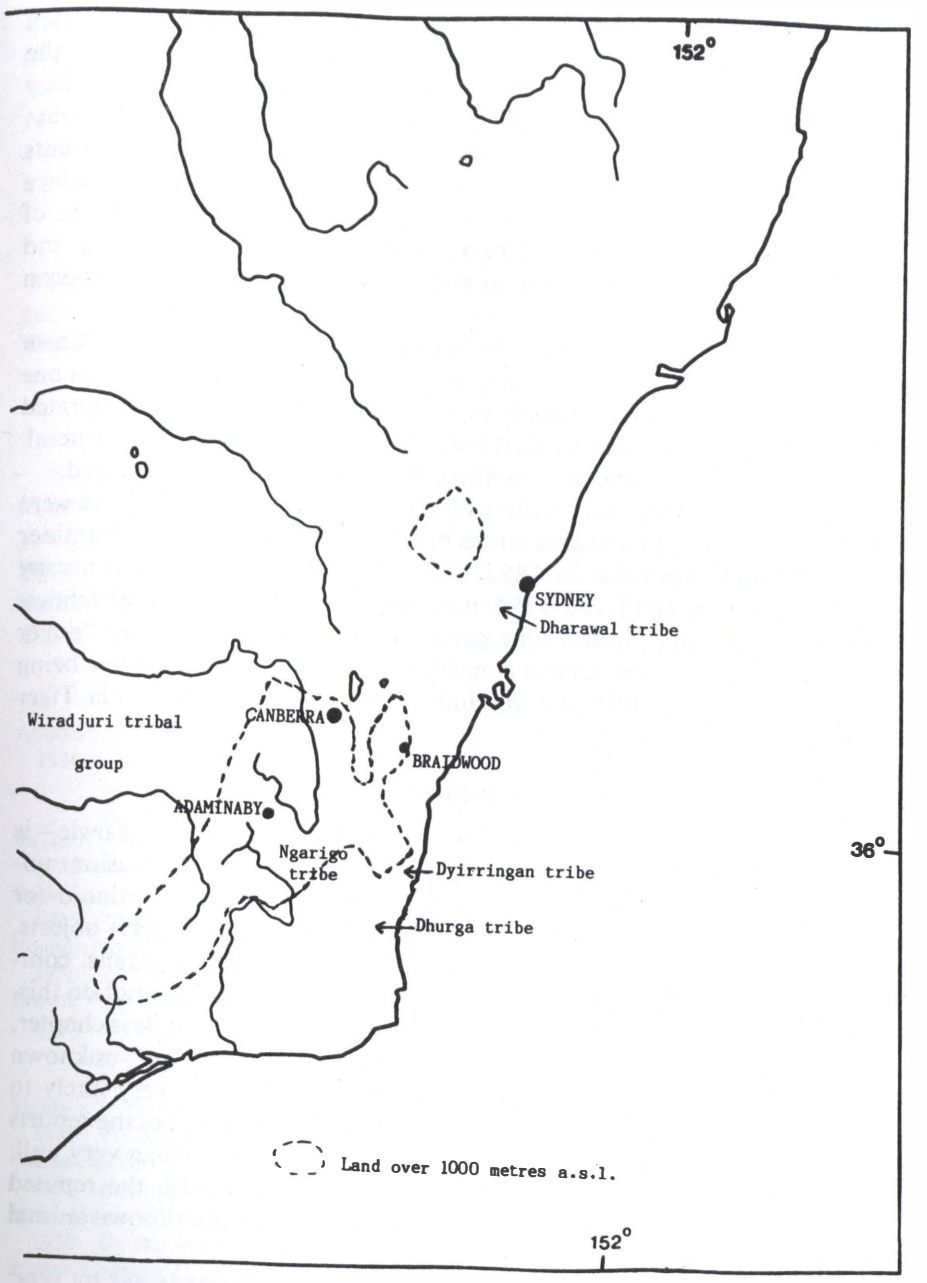

FIG. 1.—The New South Wales south coast region, the location of many Australian Aboriginal wild man traditions.

threatening, with red-rimmed eyes, hooked bills, etc.; (3) they were often described as being rather slim—just the impression that was given by the incorrectly mounted moa skeletons of the nineteenth century; and (4) they were always seen by recent immigrants. In other words, people saw what they *expected* to see; and those that made the sightings were immigrants under the stresses of loneliness, homesickness, and helplessness in the face of the wilderness. Anderson specifically likens moa "sightings" to those of supposed wild men, in different parts of the word, "a longstanding and powerful image of individual moral and material dissolution in European civilisation."

Joyner (1985) emphasizes that, to have any value, sightings of unknown animals must be independent of one another. This is the same point as one of those Anderson makes: if people *expect* to see something, uncorroborated reports that they have indeed seen it are of little value as evidence. In general, the witness's state of mind is something that simply cannot be ignored.

Bonney (1976) tells a story with a similar moral. In 1883, two tigers were reported to have escaped from a circus near Tantanoola, in the Mt. Gambier district of South Australia. In 1885, a tiger was reported seen on a nearby property. Between 1893 and 1895 there were several sightings of felines. Ferocious growls were heard. One person even spoke of a creature "never seen before." There were several concerted hunts for it, as sheep were being attacked. Finally, in 1895, the marauder was shot. The Tantanoola Tiger turned out to be a large dog.

Are There Wild Men in Australia?

The evidence for the existence of an Australian wild man—a Yowie—is extremely poor. Joyner ends his 1984 paper with just this conclusion: unknown species there may be, but that such a species is a hominoid (or hominid) is in no way required by the evidence. Bayanov (1985) objects, citing some reports from Joyner's own 1977 and 1980 monographs, combining them together to create a hairy wild man. One simply cannot do this. As on a previous occasion, I refer to Heuvelmans' (1958) Nandi Bear chapter, where he shows that, if one investigates the existence of "an" unknown animal, and lumps together all the sightings of "it," one is very likely to emerge with precisely that: an unknown animal. But if one teases the reports apart, recognizing that people often do not know their local fauna very well, and may be associating anything they do not recognize with the reputed animal, then the results may be quite different, and no truly unknown animal need be postulated.

New Australian mammal species continue to be described year by year. This is extremely exciting for the mammalogist, but there are, so far, few cryptozoological "events"—one, coincidentally, concerns a wombat (Tisdale

1986). As megafaunal survival has now been shown at such a recent date (Fethney, Horton, and Wright 1986), it is, I suppose, not completely out of the question that one or more giant marsupials hung on until the nineteenth century. I am of the same opinion as Joyner (1984): if there is a genuinely cryptozoological basis for any of the wild man (Yowie) stories, a wombat is quite certainly what it is.

Acknowledgment

I am very grateful to W. S. Ramson for sharing with me the records of *yahoo* and *yowie* obtained by the Australian National Dictionary Project at The Australian National University.

ADDENDUM

Since writing the above, W. S. Ramson has drawn my attention to a mention in C. William's *Grammar of Yuawaalaraay* (1980: 156) of the term *yuwi,* defined as a "dream spirit." The Yuawaalaraay live in the Walgett-Brewarrina district, about 29–30° S, 147–148° E, west of the Divide (in New South Wales, just south of the Queensland border). It would seem, therefore, that *yowie* myths might be quite widespread in the Western Plains district.

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